

The European Qualifications Framework and the European Lifelong Learning Perspective: How European countries are preparing to cope with the new philosophy of VET

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Abstract

The paper picks up “matching problems” related to current European education policy moves by referring to the German, the French and the Austrian VET system respectively. As we here refer to “dual systems” or “school-based systems” respectively, the pre-conditions for transforming European policy into national policies are very different. One major aspect here is the institutional framework and the progression pathways from VET to higher education. European ideas accompanying the present “Lisbon-Brugge-Copenhagen Process” demanding the opening-up of education and VET in the context of concepts such as the “Learning Economy” or “Lifelong Learning” have become a crucial background for re-framing the education system more or less fundamentally. VET systems with a strong focus on initial training obviously face the most serious challenges. Solutions lie in “nation-specific” strategies which encourage and enable change without losing the benefits and the functionality of the established system. Austria and France seem more prepared than Germany when it comes to linking up VET and higher education through so-called “hybrid qualifications”.

Introduction: the European qualifications framework and the European lifelong learning perspective

Vocational education and training (VET) systems are the product of the history, culture and society of the respective countries as they are based upon an inherent “philosophy”, “logic” or “system reference” (Georg 2005), especially when it comes to links with other educational sub-systems. Being part of a culture, but also related to national economies and labour markets (Sengenberger 1987; Deissinger 1994, 1998; Maurice 1993), VET systems do not function uniformly, especially in their linkages with general or higher education. One of the most interesting issues is that of a given “learning culture” (Harris & Deissinger 2003; Deissinger 2004, 2009b), which particularly shows up in the structures and mentalities shaping the apprenticeship system of a given country - notwithstanding the fact that apprenticeships as such may not exist in all countries in the narrow sense of the term. Germany, Switzerland and Austria certainly are those countries in Europe that have a stable, long-lasting “apprenticeship culture” and this form of initial vocational training, despite its medieval origins and “old-fashioned” terminology, is still crucial to national VET policies there. Other countries, such as France, contrast sharply, as in most typologies (Greinert 1988, 1995; Deissinger 1995) they are rather associated with strong regulation, even of the VET system, by a national government and school-based forms of vocational learning, whereby the “state model” obviously leaves out the wider involvement, commitment and participation of companies (Deissinger 2001).

In a “system” perspective, VET therefore can take different shapes. Besides the apprenticeship system, school-based forms of vocational learning, such as “vocational grammar schools” in France, “vocational colleges” in Germany or further education colleges in the UK, represent more or less traditional courses and qualifications which are normally institution-based, shaped by state influence and more or less clearly didactically directed pedagogical arrangements. There are, however, differences when it comes to formally linking up these traditional structures with general or higher education. It also seems that countries differ in terms of their VET systems and traditions, especially with respect to the relationship between full-time VET and company-based training, but also, when it comes to Europe, in terms of their adaptability to the overarching European VET policy framework.

This paper picks up the issue of how well European VET systems are prepared when it comes to implementing qualifications frameworks based on the European concept laid down in the so-called “Lisbon-Brugge-Copenhagen Process” (Winterton 2005), with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) at its core (European Commission 2005; Hanf/Rein 2007), and once

again explicitly articulated in the so-called “Maastricht-Communiqué” in 2004. The underlying idea is that all member countries should follow suit with the conceptualisation of their respective National Qualifications Framework (NQF), and should abide by a specific understanding of “Lifelong Learning” (Young 2003; Hake 1999). Earlier in the 1990s, in its White Paper on “Growth, Competitiveness and Employment” (European Commission 1993), the European Commission pointed out that Lifelong Learning had to become “the overall objective to which the national educational communities can make their own contributions”. Two years later, in a well-known White Paper on “Teaching and Training – Towards the Learning Society” (European Commission 1995), the concept of Lifelong Learning even became associated with the idea of a “personal skills card” for every European citizen which would document the knowledge and competences acquired through formal and informal learning environments.

National qualifications frameworks “support the objectives of strong and accessible qualifications pathways, a transparent qualifications system, and one that facilitates lifelong learning” (Keating 2008, p. 1). It is obvious that the European Union with the implementation of the EQF wants the boundaries between various sectors of the educational and/or training system, including higher and further education, to become increasingly permeable sub-systems, while the perception of a mismatch of learning outcomes with work requirements forces national and international agencies to re-define courses, pathways and curriculum patterns. This premise is based on a specific understanding of “competence” – very similar to the concepts developed in Anglo-Saxon countries, such as Australia and the UK, which are countries with rather “open” training markets without strong formal regulation (Harris 2001). The idea of a flexible, individual and ongoing acquisition of competences which should be independent from courses also provides the basis for open learning arrangements. In this context, which includes new approaches to assessment, such as RPL or APL, however, two important features are apparent (Wolf 1995; Deissinger/Hellwig 2005; Hellwig 2006):

- Competences should not exclusively be demonstrable through formal examinations but also through past experience.
- Competences acquired in the past have to become reliably identified, measured, accredited and certificated, even across borders within the educational system.

Therefore it is clear that there is what Keating describes as “a natural tension between the new national demands upon qualifications systems and the more localised and sectional aspects of the ownership of qualifications” (Keating 2008, p. 2). This implies that learning in framework environments is seen as rather de-contextualised in the sense that learning pathways lose their exclusiveness and

learning becomes not primarily an institutional but an individual matter. And it also leads us to a new perspective on the relationship between sub-systems and pathways within the educational system. A better understanding of how traditional vocational pathways, e.g. apprenticeships (Harris/Deissinger 2003) in particular, and the value given to VET in general work in a given national context, is required once we take into view the challenges imposed by the European Union with its Lifelong Learning policy and its sibling, the European Qualifications Framework. This policy at first sight reveals that even countries with similar VET traditions are differentially prepared for these challenges while it is a common belief that countries differing in terms of their VET traditions, especially with respect to the relationship between full-time VET and company-based training, including apprenticeships, also seem to differ in terms of their adaptability to the overarching European VET policy ideas. However, as the cases of Germany, Austria and France reveal, these categories have to be rethought. The Austrian system, with its traditional apprenticeship focus, seems closer to France than to Germany, when it comes to the issue of how these countries provide for and establish pathways between VET and HE, e.g. through “double” or “hybrid qualifications”. The purpose of this paper is to illustrate some of these issues, which also challenge methodological reflections in comparative education research that look more to institutional variables than to mental dispositions. The starting point for this will be the structural peculiarities and current problems in the German VET system.

Different starting points: Germany, France and Austria compared

Germany: Apprenticeships and the traditional negligence of full-time VET

Skill formation in the so-called dual system of VET is still the most important non-academic route in the post-compulsory sector for those German school leavers going for a formal qualification for a non-academic occupation, i.e. as a skilled worker, craftsman or clerk. The system recruits some 60 % of 16-to-19-year-olds (coming from different school backgrounds including higher secondary education) and this provides for a high level of formal skills in the German labour market. Unlike in the UK or in France, where they form a marginal sector within the vocational training systems, apprenticeships exist in nearly all branches of the German economy including the professions and parts of the civil service. In 2006, 576,153 young people took up an apprenticeship in one of the 350 “recognised skilled occupations” (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung 2008, pp. 106, 114). Currently some 1.6 million young people - with a female share of 40% - undergo formal training in the dual system. More than half of the school-leaving population of 946,766 (2006) enters the system. Although it has fared comparatively successfully in the past, pressure to tackle

deficiencies with particular elements of the dual system seems to have become stronger in recent years, including the challenges posed by the European and German Qualifications Frameworks (EQF/GQF).

Due to its cultural tradition, represented by the notion of craftsmanship and mastership in an occupation closely linked to formal training both in a company and in a part-time vocational school, the dual system appears to be a comparatively stable institutional arrangement, quite successfully withstanding substantial reform over the past decades. Institutionalisation and didactic systematisation as well as standardisation, including a uniform examination system, correspond with a “learning culture” in the apprenticeship system which gives companies a major voice in the process of skill formation (Harris and Deissinger 2003). However, a specific pedagogical focus comes in with compulsory education provided through attendance in the part-time vocational school which always lasts until the end of an apprenticeship and which includes theoretical vocational learning as well as general education. Ryan contrasts this with the Anglo-Saxon (English) approach to VET: “A striking difference from Germany is the absence of minimum training periods, such as a three-year programme for bakers. Similarly, apprentices need not take part-time technical education” (Ryan 2001, p. 136). As a compulsory post-secondary apprenticeship system the dual system is also law-based, i.e. founded on the school acts of the federal states, but also – with respect to company-based training – on a national training act, called the Vocational Training Act (Deissinger 1996).

With its strong training focus and its labour market orientation, the dual system clearly outperforms the system of full-time vocational schools in terms of intakes and graduate numbers. However, the number of students attending three of the major sub-types in full-time VET (vocational foundation year; vocational preparation courses; ordinary vocational full-time schools) increased, quite remarkably, between 1995 and 2004 by nearly 70 % (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung 2006, pp. 178, 180), while the Dual System now stagnates or even regresses (especially in the new federal states). It may be argued that there is an interaction between this rise and the critical situation in the training market (Walden 2006) which could also become evident again in the current economic crisis. As companies feel insecure about the future demand for skilled employees and complain about the lack of training maturity among school leavers, these young people have to look for alternative pathways, a problem that is aggravated by regional and occupational imbalances in the training market. Therefore, it is both the number of students who proceed to higher education and the intake of vocational full-time schools, which have increased in recent years and are likely to rise in the future (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung 2006, pp. 86, 93, 182). Due to constitutional and political reasons, the two sub-systems remain more or less unconnected with the dual system, even if the local or regional vocational part-time school and the various types of full-time schools are in most cases physically gathered

under one roof in so-called vocational school centres (Deissinger 2007, 2009a; Deissinger, Smith & Pickersgill 2006). Currently, 2.8 million young people are educated or trained in Germany's vocational schools, with 1.7 million of these attending the part-time vocational school (Berufsschule)¹.

Against the background of missing links between the various forms and sub-systems of VET, the federal government passed a new Vocational Training Act in 2005 with following objectives (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung 2005):

- the inclusion of vocational preparation schemes within the scope of regulation of the law and with it the implementation of an appropriate system of qualification modules;
- the transferability of credits obtained in school-based VET via by-laws of the federal states;
- a greater internationalisation of VET by providing opportunities for apprentices to undergo part of their vocational training abroad; and
- an ongoing modernisation of examinations by establishing the "extended" final examination.

Although these measures represent a comprehensive reform, modernisation within the dual system currently seems to happen mainly at the curricular level (including the concept of "learning fields" in the vocational school curriculum which abolishes the traditional orientation subjects and makes instruction in the school more "realistic" – for more information see Sloane 2001). It has resulted in the creation or revision of training schemes within the system of "skilled training occupations" which now allow for modest ways of modularisation. Implanting modules within training schemes as didactical units with a mandatory but optional character (like in the IT occupations created in 1997) no longer is considered to be incompatible with a holistic notion of competence and an "occupational orientation" of training (Euler 1998, pp. 96 ff.; Deissinger 1998). However, there are other suggestions using modules in a more open manner, and there is a general conviction in the research community that the system has to become more flexible (Euler & Severing 2006; Baethge, Solga & Wieck 2007). On the other hand, interest groups, such as trade unions and chambers of commerce, are eager to underline their belief in the efficiency of the dual system as the "king's way" into skilled employment. It is evident from this that the debate on the introduction of a German Qualifications Framework (Deutscher Qualifikationsrahmen or DQR/GQR) implies many problems for this comparatively solid and historically grown German education system and especially for the country's apprenticeship culture (Deissinger 1994; Deissinger 2004; Harris/Deissinger 2003).

Regardless of the revised Vocational Training Act, Germany is still facing serious challenges and with issues still to be solved with respect to the European and German QF:

- Missing links between VET and HE in terms of progression, inclusion and permeability of the education system
- Unreliable links between different streams within VET, especially when it comes to valuation and accreditation of non-dual system VET or vocational preparation and integration measures
- Lack of differentiation within VET in terms of skill levels and duration, also with a view to the special needs of students, including structurally disadvantaged young people
- No clear relationships and “border-crossings” between non-formal or informal learning and formal VET

Concerning the first of these problem issues, progression to higher education in a formal manner is limited because there is no direct pathway from apprenticeship to university or polytechnic. Instead, students need to take detours, either before or following an apprenticeship in the dual system, if they want to proceed to higher education. Basically, only two institutions provide access from the vocational school system (full-time not part-time), i.e. the “Wirtschaftsgymnasium” and the “Technisches Gymnasium” (commercial or technical vocational high school) as well as the “Berufskolleg” or “Höhere Berufsfachschule” (vocational college). In the first case, students obtain a general higher education qualification certificate (Abitur), in the second they can go for the lower-level polytechnic entrance qualification (Fachhochschulreife) together with a so-called “assistant qualification” (Deissinger 2007). Only the latter may be considered to have the quality of a “hybrid qualification” since it is linked to an occupational qualification (which yet has no substantial value on the labour market as it is not an apprenticeship qualification).

On the other hand, there are clear signs that Germany’s VET policy is willing to proceed on the “European path of change”. The consultations on the German Qualifications Framework (GQF), under the umbrella of both the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) and the German Education Ministers Conference (KMK), are proof of this, notwithstanding the fact that the relevant actors (above all trade unions and employers organisations) find it hard to conclude from the EQF blueprint that (a) introducing different levels of occupations or occupational profiles or even (b) designing training along more explicitly modular principles would be measures that could help realise the “competence concept” inherent of the EQF. A recent study on behalf of the BMBF suggests that all kinds of vocational education and training, independent from the venue and the duration of training measures, could be re-aligned into

a national modular system, without giving up the option to get trained in a “full occupation” (Euler & Severing 2006). Apart from these issues within the VET system itself, the issue of “opening up borders” between different streams and pathways in secondary and tertiary education, also seems a long way from being solved. It has become clear now that the GQF will have eight levels (like the EQF) and will cover general education in schools, vocational education and training, further training and higher education alike (Nehls 2008). However, in terms of defining the entry requirements for higher education, the relevant qualifications are still mainly obtained in general education, although there are quite substantial deviations in individual federal states.

Therefore, besides the unsolved German problem how to cope with the so-called “measure system” or “transition system”, with a growing number of school-leavers entering “irregular” tracks into and through VET (Ness 2007; Walden 2006), one substantial backlog demand lies in the missing link between VET and HE. Apart from some vocational full-time schools that offer a polytechnic entrance qualification or a general HE entrance qualification (Abitur, e.g. through the Wirtschaftsgymnasium or commercial high school), there is no reliable bridge between the dual system and the tertiary system. Taking the European framework issue seriously for Germany means that permeability inevitably has to become a crucial feature of the whole education system enabling students to travel from one system to the other via specified progression routes that are formally linked to the NQF.

France: School-based VET and the traditional negligence of company involvement in the VET system

In France, the situation is quite different from Germany, and both labour market structures and cultural institutions are responsible for France being described as a “school model” of VET (Greinert 1988). This label is due to specific structural features which are closely linked with the role of the central government in directing the whole education system (Bouyx 1996). Here, the political system, too, works in another way since, in Germany, it is the federal states that have a nearly exclusive say in all educational matters outside company-based VET, and, even more important, chambers as well as social partners play no explicit role in shaping the VET system, including the creation of training courses or the organisation of examinations. As Keating et al. put it: “The strong social partnership upon which VET is built in Germany compares to the statist approaches in France. A limited role of the central state in Germany compares with a high degree of centralism in France. A high degree of separation of TVET from the mainstream education system in Germany compares with a close relationship in France” (Keating et al. 2002, p. 29). In France, it is also the “legacy” of the past which “remains today” (ibid., p. 32), and it is associated with the heritage of the French Revolution, when, among other measures taken by the republican government at that time, the guilds, being the bearers of the old apprenticeship tradition of the “ancien régime”, were outlawed. Therefore

it may be asserted that in the French case, historically and culturally, there has been an even more striking breach with the old VET model than in most other European countries, including the UK (Deissinger 1994; 2001). The same applies to the idea of “elite formation”, which now makes the French VET system appear as one with a “Napoleonic stamp” on it, with different types of secondary exams bearing different values. Against this background it becomes understandable that initial vocational training in the apprenticeship system, being outside an instruction-dominated learning environment, has always remained the weakest element in a “highly academic and prestigious education system” which also is “extremely hierarchical, and has a strong link with the administrative elite” (Keating et al. 2002, p. 33).

Nevertheless, due to the lack of “separation” within the VET system in its main stream realisation – which is school-based - France seems to be more clearly “prepared” for the EQF in so far as its education system is already structured in “stages”, “levels” and “grades”, indicating the value and the progression options in the whole system, and this includes VET in schools in the same way as general or higher education. However, one striking feature is the separation of the apprenticeship system (apprentissage) from the state school system, which has implications for the social value this institution is normally rendered (Hörner 1994, Deissinger 2001). Although the organisation of apprenticeships basically resembles the dual system in Germany, its quantitative importance falls behind the three major tracks in the vocational school system (called “lycées professionnelles”) with three different types of formal qualifications: the CAP (certificat d’aptitude professionnelle), the BEP (brevet d’études professionnelles) and the BacPro (baccalauréat professionnel).

It is especially the latter (Gendron 2005), introduced in 1985 as a work-based route in the school-based system that was to “capture the prestige of the baccalauréat” (Keating et al. 2002, p. 35), which, besides being a vocational qualification, offers a second option, i.e. the progression into higher education. In contrast, the CAP and the BEP are “normal” vocational qualifications on different levels of the French NQF. The BacPro appears, at least formally, to be an instrument through which the two separated worlds of general and vocational education might be bridged, and hence it may be seen as a tool to soften the “strong structural dualisms” typical of the French system (ibid., p. 33). Therefore, despite its obvious centralist implications, the French system appears more pluralist in a formal sense than the German system with the major significance it gives to apprenticeships. However, this type of a university entrance qualification is less valued in social and economic terms than the two other versions of the “baccalauréat”, the “baccalauréat générale and the baccalauréat technologique”

Since 1969, the French NQF or CNCP (Cadre National des Certifications Professionnelles) has been in existence comprising seven levels and sub-levels, reaching from “Niveau VI” (completion of compulsory schooling without a

qualification) to “Niveau I” (the highest level of university education including research studies). Examples of the latter are the “Diplome d’Etudes Supérieures Spécialisées” (DEES) and the newly established Master Degree courses and qualifications. The indication “Bac+5” stands for the years of studies following the acquisition of the French university entrance qualification (baccalauréat), which is located on level IV of the French NQF (Hörner 1994; Zettelmeier 2005). The core vocational qualifications (CAP and BEP) are situated one level down on level V, which also means that failing to pass the French “A level” examination (being on the same level) leads to being on the same level with somebody who has completed a skilled worker’s qualification successfully. Also, the BacPro has not really fulfilled expectations to raise the status of VET in general as young people now prefer to go to (mostly short-course) university studies. On the other hand, however, one could argue that this complies with European VET policy better than what other countries offer in this respect.

It is correct, against this background, to label the French VET system as hierarchical and profoundly rooted in the notion of general and technical, but not necessarily vocational education. In this context, historical explanations may be referred to in order to understand why this system works as it does. Apprenticeships as the low-quality and low-status stratum of the VET system have never been a strong component of the French education system, due to their virtual abolition in the wake of the French Revolution. Also, in France, labour markets work in a different way than in Germany and companies and above all public institutions follow the hierarchical qualification structure which the state reproduces through its schools in a more or less direct manner (Maurice 1993). On the other hand, having incorporated the “framework concept” even earlier than the UK, France seems better prepared to think in categories of equivalence and parity of esteem than Germany, although the notorious devaluation and low reputation of practical, company-based VET, such as the apprenticeship system (Lasserre 1994), certainly is a burden which France takes into a unified European concept of education and training. The CNCP, however, is an instrument which – at least theoretically – depicts the formal relations between different qualifications and their underlying institutional structures. The latter, however, are still seen as crucial in defining the quality and social implications of educational pathways which are predominantly characterised by their theoretical and academic level of learning and teaching. Therefore, France seems formally more prepared than Germany, while the borderlines between school types, types of qualifications and pathways within the education system are likely to remain stable features of the education system.

Austria: Linking up two worlds?

It may be argued that only few countries have well developed dual training systems which are normally apprenticeship systems. By linking up entry-level training with workplaces these systems have the advantage that they are able

to impart competences needed in the world of work. They are often admired because training costs are mainly carried by private enterprises but can be partly compensated for by making use of the trainee's productive contribution during the training period which is specifically manifest, at least in the case of Germany, in many occupations in the craft sector. If one looks at Switzerland, Austria, and the Northern province of Italy, the Alto Adige with its German-speaking population, we find similar structures, especially with respect to the craft sector. In Austria, it is also the apprenticeship system which is linked with a high status. Some 40 per cent of the school-leaving population undergo training in one of the 260 occupations currently on offer after compulsory schooling. As in Germany, Austrian VET policy enforces a continuous renewal and adaptation of the content of this training to keep it up-to-date (Archan & Wallner 2007).

Austria's VET system, as far as apprenticeships are concerned, has many similarities with Germany, due to many parallel historical developments going back to the Middle Ages (Gruber 2004). Also, Austria is a federal state although the central government has a major say in educational matters, including the regulation of schools involved in VET. The more "holistic character" of the Austrian VET system may be an expression of this comparatively strong state regulation, but it is also the structure of the system itself which appears more homogeneous than in the German case. Generally, observers call it a "three-column system" as two types of full-time VET (representing specific levels of educational achievement for a different clientel) stand on par with the dual system, which is not as highly rated both socially and economically as in Germany and is not seen as the most relevant pathway into skilled employment (Rauner 2008, p. 24).

Against this background, while in Switzerland the apprenticeship system is even more prevalent than in Germany and full-time VET only plays a minor role (Gonon 2001), Austria has more students in full-time VET in the vocational school system than in the apprenticeship system, and more undergraduates come from vocational schools than from general education. The two institutions providing this alternative pathway for school-leavers are called "Berufsbildende Mittlere Schule" (BMS or vocational middle school) and "Berufsbildende Höhere Schule" (BHS or vocational high school) respectively (Aff 2006). The BMS is a three-to-four year type of school which, besides a vocational qualification, offers the opportunity, through additional examinations, called the "Berufsreifepprüfung", which then becomes a typical "hybrid qualification", including the general university entrance qualification (Schlögl & Klimmer 2001). The BHS takes five years, also combining in the curriculum, like the BMS, general studies with theoretical and practical vocational learning, including "practice firms" (Übungsfirmer) – a kind of complex learning environment which has also been implemented in the full-time VET system of Germany, however with little success with respect to raising the labour market value of school-based (non-apprenticeship) qualifications (Deissinger 2007). The BHS

seems attractive since it offers entry into high-level occupational markets and the universities. In the case of a follow-up entry from the BHS to a polytechnic (Fachhochschule) there is even the option to get prior learning from the vocational school course accredited towards the academic course. How closely BHS and higher education seem to be interwoven can be seen in the fact that even titles commonly used in the tertiary system, such as "Ingenieur" (normally a diploma qualification equivalent to a Master), are qualified at the BHS in its technical variant (Piskaty & Elsik 1998; Archan & Mayr 2006, p. 55).

In the same way, graduates of the commercial academies (Handelsakademien), as the business-oriented type of the BHS is called, receive occupation-based training as well as general education that enables them to attain the university entrance qualification for all subjects (Allgemeine Hochschulreife). Courses here also take longer than in general education (5 years) in comparison with the 4 year courses at high schools). Student numbers in recent decades indicate that both students and parents value these qualifications and it is in fact the 5 year course which has become increasingly attractive. As a matter of fact, the "labour market integration share" of BMS and BHS rose from 21 % to 57 % between 1970 and 2005 (Hoppe 2005), and it is the BHS which is seen as the "winner" of this shift away from both general higher secondary education and the apprenticeship system. With the introduction of Bachelor degrees in the wake of the "Bologna process", however, the commercial academies might be coming under increasing pressure as new qualifications could replace the older ones, particularly in the more sophisticated occupational sectors (Fortmüller 2007).

Conclusions and Perspectives

It is still initial training through the dual system which is seen as the core component of the German VET system and most major stakeholders make it clear that it should be shielded off from potential erosion due to European policy. On the other hand, it seems inevitable that employers will become more open to flexible and regional solutions when it comes to the formation or accreditation of vocational qualifications. In the current debate accompanying the impending construction and implementation of the GQF, one of the basic problems could be the questioning of the "vocational principle" with its holistic notion of "full" or "fundamental" qualifications which any career or employment perspective should emerge (Deissinger 1998; Reuling 2000). Sticking to the overall importance of initial training certainly makes sense considering the functionality and merits of the dual system (with the training market now again offering more training opportunities for young people now as it did in the preceding two decades). On the other hand, VET policy should avoid narrowing its view to issues related to the dual system, such as modernisation of training schemes or the training market. Taking the European framework seriously implies that the existing "irregular VET system" and more "individualised" approaches enter the political and pedagogical agenda more visibly and strongly.

If one looks at the UK or the Australian VET system we find a less clear commitment to initial formal training but instead flexible delivery of skills and, quite remarkably, “student traffic” (Harris 2005) between different sub-systems, but also experience with the framework concept. Both the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF), being among the first frameworks, and the UK’s National Qualifications Framework(s) and Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) accept, at least formally, that there should be links and open borders between sub-systems, pathways, forms of learning and institutions in the VET system, including access pathways into higher education. For other countries, such a move certainly requires more flexibility and openness towards the European VET strategy without ignoring the mixed experiences of Anglo-Saxon VET systems with “outcomes” and “competences”. However, both the French and the Austrian VET systems (having quite a number of similarities with the German system) seem to be prepared in a better way than the German one when it comes to progression from VET into higher education. It is especially the Austrian full-time VET system which proves that preserving the value of VET in a principal way does not necessarily have to collide with the idea of opening up the VET system as such, and it also proves that general education does not need to be the exclusive breeding ground for future university graduates. Still, there is not much research on institutionalised pathways or progression routes in the different countries, especially looking at “hybrid qualifications”, such as the French BacPro or the Austrian qualifications obtainable in the BHS, the upper full-time stream of the VET system. In Germany, insights into this important issue would certainly be welcomed, since it could be helpful to learn from countries that use these qualifications, maybe in a similar way as Austria does, without degrading the VET track against the academic one. For comparative methodology, this would certainly mean that one starts to look more closely to “transition modes” and “progression routes”, rather than focussing on institutions and sub-systems as such. However, behind these routes or pathways also depend on the way countries deal with the relationship between general, vocational and higher education. It is obvious that in most countries VET still is valued much less than academic qualifications. Therefore, a “third way” between the “apprenticeship model” and the “flexible model” of the Anglo-Saxon world could be realigning different modes of vocational learning by linking them both to the labour market and to higher education. If this is what the European Union’s VET policy is about, it should support developments and trigger new solutions to this end.

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(Footnotes)

¹ See <http://bildungsklick.de/pm/66958/berufliche-schulen-mehr-schueler-im-frueheren-bundesgebiet>.